

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President's Foreign Intelligence  
Advisory Board

SUBJECT: Central Intelligence Agency Operation of  
the OXCART

1. Since last May the Central Intelligence Agency has been operating the OXCART aircraft out of Kadena AB, Okinawa. The aircraft has flown twenty-five missions over Southeast Asia and two over North Korea. These missions have provided the Intelligence Community with an outstanding product not otherwise available and the performance record of the OXCART during this period has proven its reliability.

2. Studies conducted by the Department of Defense have indicated that the USAF SR-71 has the capability to perform the Vietnam mission in an adequate manner. Present plans call for the OXCART to return to the United States prior to June of this year and then subsequently be mothballed.

3. The OXCART, under CIA aegis, has proven itself a capable, reliable and unique asset of the Intelligence Community. Prudence dictates, and I strongly recommend, that the OXCART be retained and remain a civilian asset operated by the CIA to provide the President with a civilian option for covert reconnaissance overflight.

Richard Helms  
Director

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19 February 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President's Foreign Intelligence  
Advisory Board

SUBJECT: CIA Operation of the OXCART

1. As the members of the Board are aware, the OXCART aircraft has flown 25 reconnaissance missions over Southeast Asia since May of last year. They have also flown two reconnaissance missions over North Korea. This operation has provided the Intelligence Community with an outstanding product not otherwise available and the performance record of the OXCART has proven its reliability. At the present time there is in effect a plan to replace the OXCART in the Far East with the USAF SR-71. Under this plan the OXCART will return to the United States and be mothballed after June of this year.

2. Prior to the OXCART return to the United States, the SR-71 will be co-located on Okinawa with the OXCART until such time as the SR-71 assumes completely the Viet Nam mission. Recent comparative tests, conducted with the OXCART and the SR-71, indicate that the SR-71 is capable of performing the military mission over North Vietnam. The only appreciable difference in the two aircraft is the swath width of the camera. (62 miles in the case of the OXCART and 26 miles

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in the case of the SR-71.) The OXCART has the greater width since it was designed for maximum covert reconnaissance of denied territory while the SR-71 was designed for coverage of specific military targets. The reason for the OXCART remaining on Okinawa during the incipient stage of SR 71 operations is to give positive insurance against any intelligence gap during the transition.

3. The nine month operation of the OXCART has proven beyond a doubt its capability to provide necessary coverage of denied territory with exceptional reliability. Prudence dictates that such a capability should not be discarded without serious consideration of the impact of such action on the Intelligence Community. The impact of such action has already caused some discussion among military and civilian agencies in the tenor not so much of mothballing the OXCART but determining now which Agency should operate it. Since the cost of either military or Agency operation of the OXCART is approximately equal the question of cost becomes academic.

4. There are two major overriding factors that strongly sustain the rationale for retaining the OXCART under CIA operation. The first of these is the unique manned reconnaissance

collection capability represented by OXCART is a contingency essential to the fulfillment of high priority intelligence requirements of national interest. The last nine months of OXCART operation has only gone to strengthen this conviction. The second and most important reason for CIA retention of the operation of OXCART is the modus operandi of CIA covert aerial reconnaissance. The CIA modus operandi runs, as it has in the case of the OXCART, the complete gantlet to include:

a. A unique system of research, development and technological breakthrough that has been developed over the past twelve years.

b. A secure and experienced development and operation of vehicles, systems and sensors.

c. A civilian espionage capability for manned aircraft reconnaissance that cannot be duplicated by any other U. S. government Agency.

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e. The most sophisticated operationally proved, manned reconnaissance system ever developed.

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5. To mothball the OXCART will deprive the Community of the option of a civilian capability for overflight of denied territory. In order to fulfill the Charter responsibility placed upon the CIA by the National Security Act of 1947, I strongly recommend operation of the OXCART be retained by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Richard Helms  
Director